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INTRODUCTION

For some, Romans 9 is one of the most mindboggling and difficult passages to interpret in the entire canon. This is due to the reality of some “troubling” truths that it teaches—reprobation and hardening. As a result, many struggle to take Paul’s words seriously and to handle them with honesty. As Gerhard Maier says, “the history of the exegesis of Rom 9 could be described as the history of attempts to escape this clear observation [namely, that Paul teaches reprobation].”¹ Needless to say, Paul’s words are neither easily understood nor accepted by many contemporary readers.

With honesty and humility, this paper seeks to analyze exegetically and theologically Paul’s language in Romans 9, particularly that which relates to reprobation and hardening. This purpose will be accomplished in three chapters. First, some initial considerations will be made concerning Paul’s overall argument and the nature of the election to which Paul makes mention. Secondly, the doctrine of reprobation will be analyzed, as based out of Romans 9. Then finally, in the last chapter Paul’s teaching of hardening (with reference to Exodus 4-14) will be examined.²

¹ Mensch un frier Wille nach den juedichen Religions partein zwichen Ben Sira
² This author will use his own translation of scripture throughout the course of this paper unless specified.
CHAPTER 1

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Nature of Election in Romans 9

Before examining reprobation and hardening in Romans 9, some preliminary matters must be settled. Interpreters throughout Church history have by and large understood the language of Romans 9 as referring to individual election to salvation. However, in contemporary interpretation many have begun to propose that Paul is speaking of an election to a temporal or historical task and/or an election of corporate entities such as nations.3

Election to Temporal Task or Salvation?

These interpreters provide various reasons in favor of election to a temporal task in Romans 9. For example, they argue that the Old Testament (OT) texts Paul references do not directly address salvation but historical tasks (i.e., choosing Isaac and Jacob as patriarchs, [specifically the “serving” language of verse 12], selecting Moses as a leader, and raising up Pharaoh as a ruler) and that the reference to vessels for honor and dishonor denotes not eternal destinies but superior and menial use. However, this interpretation is exegetically untenable. The evidence lopsidedly falls toward the direction of salvific election.

Although the OT texts Paul references may not directly address salvation or damnation, Paul’s use of these texts in Romans 9 undeniably does. First, Romans 9 follows eight previous chapters specifically addressing the Gospel and salvation. For Paul to leap entirely out of this discussion would be extremely unnatural. Secondly, Paul begins his argument in chapter 9 with a lament over the unbelief of his fellow Israelites (1-5). Therefore, Paul’s defense of the faithfulness of God’s word (v.6-23) must respond to the unbelief of the vast majority of Israel. To interpret Paul as referring to anything

4. Paul is not “misusing” these texts but drawing out principles about God’s character and the way He works. His inference is that God’s sovereign freedom in showing mercy and hardening (as seen by the OT texts cited) extends and is relevant to the current issue of Israel’s unbelief.

5. Paul indicates he has Israel’s lack of salvation in mind when he states that he could wish himself to be accursed from Christ. Paul was grieved over Israel’s unbelief, not an ultimate loss of her theocratic privileges, for in verses 4-5 Paul speaks in the present tense of Israel’s possession of such blessings (cf. Rom 11:26-29).
outside of the realm of salvation makes his argument incoherent and mere nonsense.  

Thirdly, Paul’s choice of words indicate with certainty that the subject at hand is eternal destinies (i.e., “anathema from Christ” [v.3], “called” [v.7] or “one who calls” [v.11], “children of promise” [v.8], “purpose” [v.11, 17], “election” [v.11], “not of works” [v.11], “mercy” [v.15, 16, 18, 23], “hardens” [v.18], “wrath” [v.22], “destruction” [v.22], “glory” [v.23]). And lastly, although Paul’s overall argument in Romans 9-11 concerns

6. For example, what would distinguish true, spiritual Israel from physical Israel (v.6) if Paul simply had theocratic blessings in mind since all physical Israel possesses those (Piper, Justification of God, 66-67)? Discussing temporal roles in redemptive history would do nothing to confirm Paul’s assertion of a contemporary remnant of Israelites (v.6, cf. 11:1-10). As Piper says elsewhere with biting sarcasm, interpreting Paul’s words as referring to election to temporal tasks “carries a good deal of force, especially when treated (as it usually is) without reference to the logical development of Paul’s argument. . . .” (58).


Elsewhere “calling” language is used in a salvific sense (i.e., Rom 8:28-30; 1 Cor 1:9, 24, 26; Gal 1:6, 15; 5:8; Eph 4:1, 4; 1 Thes 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; 2 Thes 2:14; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 1:9), most notably verses 24-26 of this very chapter (Rom 9).

“Children of promise” (Gal 4:28) and similar “children of God” (Rom 8:16, 21; Phil 2:15) elsewhere refer to saved individuals (Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation? Some Exegetical And Theological Reflections,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 36:1 (March 1993): 28. “Purpose” is used by Paul elsewhere to refer to God’s sovereign, decretive purpose to save (i.e., Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11; 2 Tim 1:9).

“Election” is often used by Paul to refer to God’s unconditional selection of some to salvation (i.e., Rom 8:33; 11:7; Eph 1:4; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Tit 1:1).

“Not of works” is extremely reminiscent of various other Pauline verses, specifically in the book of Romans (i.e., 3:20, 27-28; 4:2, 6; 9:32; 11:6), which state that salvation is not by works (i.e., Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:5).

“Mercy” often refers to salvation in the Pauline epistles (i.e., Rom 11:30-32; 15:9; Eph 2:4; 1 Tim 1:13, 16; Tit 3:5).

“Hardening” language is used elsewhere by Paul in an anti-salvific sense (i.e., Rom 2:5; Rom 11:7, 25).
the historical destiny of Israel as a nation, this destiny in Paul’s mind is not merely historical, but salvific (Rom 9-11).

Corporate or Individual Election?

Attempts are also made by some interpreters to prove that Paul is not referring to the election and rejection of individuals but corporate entities. For example, they argue that in Romans 9-11 Paul is dealing with the place of corporate Israel’s in God’s plan, that the original context of Malachi 1:2-3 (quoted in verse 13) refers to the nations of Israel and Edom, and that the potter metaphor has corporate associations as indicated by its use in the OT (Is 45:9-11; Jer 18:1-6). However, although these reasons appear extremely valid when viewed in isolation, such an interpretation has no grounding when placed amidst Paul’s argument in verses 1-23.

First, Paul’s thesis is that not all physical Israelites are truly spiritual Israelites (v.6). He proves this by using the individuals Isaac and Jacob (in contrast to Ishmael and Esau) as examples that not all physical descendants of Abraham are spiritual descendants of Abraham (7-13). Therefore, as Murray points out with precision, Paul would do nothing to prove his point if he is speaking of corporate Israel in verses 8-13.

The question posed for the apostle is: how can the covenant promise of God be regarded as inviolate when the mass of those who belong to Israel, who are comprised in the elect nation in terms of the Old Testament passages cited about (Deut. 4:37 et al.) have remained in unbelief and come short of the covenant

“Wrath” is often used by Paul to denote the impending judgment and anger of God due to sin, particularly in Romans (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 12:19; 13:4-5). “Destruction” is a word Paul uses to refer to eschatological destruction or eternal damnation (i.e., Phil 1:28; 1 Tim 6:9).

promises? His answer would fail if it were simply an appeal to the collective, inclusive, theocratic election of Israel. Such a reply would be no more than appeal to the fact that his kinsmen were Israelites and thus no more than a statement of the fact which, in view of their unbelief, created the problem.  

Secondly, the greater context of Romans 9-11 refers to the salvation of *individuals* (i.e., 9:24; 30), namely a remnant of Israel (9:27-29; 11:1-10, cf. 25). Thirdly, in Romans 9 Paul repeatedly refers to *individuals* (Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and Pharaoh), and in verse 15-21, only uses the singular. And lastly, concerning Paul’s use of the potter and clay metaphor, it should be noted that this metaphor was well known and was used frequently in the Jewish literature of Paul’s day to refer to a variety of subjects in diverse contexts for an assortment of reasons. Consequently, one ought not to assume Paul is using the metaphor in a corporate sense, especially given his flow of his argument. For example, “vessels of mercy” is not a term representing corporate groups but *individual* Jews and Gentiles called to salvation (v.24-26).

**A Brief Overview of Romans 9:1-23**

With those matters settled, that Paul is referring to individuals and their eternal destinies, a brief overview of Paul’s argument in Romans 9:1-23 will be helpful.

In verses 1-5 Paul laments the mass unbelief of his fellow Israelites, to whom belong such great privileges and promises such as the hope of salvation through their

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Messiah. But the unbelief of so many Israelites is not simply a personal disappointment for Paul, but a theological dilemma for the Christian—if God’s word can fail Israel, how can God’s word, such as His promise to save (Rom 1-8), be trusted? Paul responds to this quandary with a thesis in verses 6-7, that not all of corporate and ethnically elect Israel is spiritually elect Israel (cf. Rom 2:28-29). In other words, God’s word has not failed, for just as God unconditionally elected Isaac and Jacob (v.9-13), His “purpose according to election” (v.11) at this present time is only to save a remnant of Israelites (11:1-10). But nevertheless, God will eventually fulfill His promises and save national Israel (11:26-27) since “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29, ESV). He is faithful.

However, Paul rightly assumes that this argument, based on God’s unconditional election, will provoke a question or objection from His listeners: if God unconditionally elects some to salvation and not others, is God unjust (v.14)? Using the examples of Moses and Pharaoh, Paul answers this objection negatively by asserting that God possesses the sovereign freedom to show mercy to whomever He wishes and to harden whomever He pleases (v.14-18).

But again Paul understands that this argument will incite another objection: if God hardens whomever He wishes, how can God find fault in those whom He hardens, “for who has resisted His purpose” (v.19)? To this objection Paul responds that just as a potter has the authority to make vessels for various uses, God has the sovereign right to make “vessels of wrath” (or “vessels for dishonor”) for damnation and “vessels of mercy” (or “vessels of honor”) for salvation.
CHAPTER 2

REPROBATION

Reprobation is well defined as “God’s eternal, sovereign, unconditional, immutable, wise, holy, and mysterious decree whereby, in electing some to eternal life, he passes others by, and then justly condemns them for their own sin—all to his own glory.” The following chapter seeks to provide more substance to this definition by examining the difficult doctrine of reprobation through the lens of Romans 9.

The Validity of Reprobation

God’s immutable, unthwartable, eternal, unconditional, efficacious decreeing of everything that comes to pass, down to the smallest details, is taught all throughout scripture. And this theme of God’s absolute sovereign control over all things as well as His foreordaining everything that ever occurs permeates Paul’s entire argument in


12. That is, not based on prescience but according to His secret counsel and for His own glory.

Romans 9. Now if God sovereignly predestined all that occurs, including the sinful acts of man (Gen 45:5-8; 50:20 [cf. Ps 105:17]; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Rom 9:17-18 [cf. Ex 5:6-22; 9:34-35]; Rev 17:17), it logically follows that all who are damned are not damned outside of God’s decree but according to His predetermination. In other words, a proper theological backdrop to reprobation is not simply “double predestination” but “everything predestination.”

What is assumed in the argument above is the fact that the election of some to salvation necessarily means the passing over of the rest to damnation. Therefore, in light of God’s comprehensive decrees, to assert the unconditional predestination of some to salvation while denying the predestination of the rest to anything but damnation is

14. As John S. Feinberg says, “If what Paul has been teaching in chapter 9 does not mean that God controls all things, this would have been a perfect time to say so” (No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God [Wheaton: Crossway, 2001], 711).

15. “If sin were outside of God’s decree, then very little would be included in this decree. . . . For whatever is not done to the glory of the Christian God and out of faith in Jesus Christ is sin. . . . But if sin is outside the decree of God. . . . God’s power is reduced to the forces of nature, such as the spinning of galaxies and the laws of gravity and entropy. Most of history is outside his control” (Palmer, Calvinism, 120-121).

16. As Palmer says, “Preterition, God’s passing by of some in electing others, is not a logical deduction of election but is wrapped up in the very essence of biblical election” (Calvinism, 131). Even non-Calvinist thinkers such as John Wesley (“Free Grace,” The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 3, Sermons 71-114 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], 547; “Predestination Calmly Considered,” The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 10, Letters, Essays, Dialogs and Addresses [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], 229) and Roger E. Olson (Against Calvinism [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 109) agree with this truth. As A.W. Pink says, “Making any choice means something was chosen and something was refused. . . . The purpose to give it [faith] only to some, involves the purpose not to give it to others.” (The Sovereignty of God [Alachua: Bridge-Logos, 2008], 97-99). Note also 1 Thes 5:9 where Paul seems to assume this truth.
mere gobbledygook. “In giving life and breath to those He knew would reject Christ, did He therefore essentially create them for damnation?” The answer is, “yes.”

Now in turning to Romans 9, Paul paints the exact same picture. Having argued for God’s sovereign freedom to elect some to salvation (v.6-18), Paul rightly assumes the reality of the opposite side of election—reprobation—and responds to a rhetorical objection to it in verses 20-23. He answers this objection by asserting God’s sovereign authority to make “vessels of wrath having been prepared for destruction” (v.22)—words that can refer to nothing other than reprobation.

However, some argue from Paul’s silence concerning who is doing the preparing and/or from καταρτίζω (“having been prepared”) being middle voice that the vessels of wrath prepare themselves for destruction (or at minimum, God is not the preparer). But this interpretation has several flaws. First, καταρτίζω is not middle but passive voice. And secondly, that Paul’s argument in Romans 9 has dealt explicitly with God’s determinative purposes (see v.19) argues for God being the preparer. As Wallace says,

In v 20 the vessel is shaped by God’s will, not its own (“Will that which is molded say to its maker, ‘Why have you made me this way?’”). In v 21, Paul asks a question with οὐκ (thus expecting a positive answer): Is not the destiny of

17. Pink, Sovereignty, 98.


the vessels (one for honor, one for dishonor) entirely predetermined by their Creator? Verse 22 is the answer to that question. Paul’s parallel language in verse 23, “vessels of mercy prepared beforehand (προετοιµάζω) for glory,” further supports that 1) God is the one hardening (“He prepared”), 2) eternal destinies are in focus (“wrath” and “destruction” contra. “riches of His glory” and “mercy”), and 3) Paul is concerned with God’s predetermined plan from eternity past (“prepared beforehand”). So in conclusion, “vessels of wrath having been prepared for destruction” refers to the non-elect—those omitted from election and predestined to damnation.

**Reprobation as a Passive Decree of God**

The unfortunate result of the term “double predestination” is that it seems to suggest that God’s predestining the non-elect to damnation is perfectly parallel to His active role in predestinating the elect to salvation. However, reprobation is to be properly understood in terms of preterition—God’s passing over or decisively omitting some (hence, “non-elect”) in His decree of electing some to salvation. Therefore, God double predestines, but He does not “double elect;” He elects and efficaciously omits.

**The Unconditionality of Reprobation**

Election to salvation is unconditional, meaning it is not based on anything found or foreseen in man but based solely on God and the sovereign freedom of His decree in


eternity past (v.11-16; cf. Eph 1:4-5, 11). Logically then, since election is unconditional, non-election (preterition and reprobation) must also be equally unconditional. \textsuperscript{23} Paul validates this inference in Romans 9. First, Esau’s rejection is according to “the purpose of God” (v.13, cf. v.11). Secondly, Paul follows up this truth by reasserting God’s sovereign freedom more explicitly (v.14-18). But if election and reprobation are conditional, what would be the sense of Paul’s rhetorical objection in verse 14? On the contrary, this objection assumes unconditionality. Thirdly, as Paul discusses reprobation in verses 19-23, he pronounces God’s sovereign freedom to create “from the same lump” of clay some vessels for wrath and others for glory. In other words, reprobation is not conditioned on man (the elect and non-elect are both “from the same lump”), but unconditionally grounded in God’s choice and purposes (see below) as the potter.

**The Conditionality of Damnation**

Those who assert unconditional election yet deny the unconditionality of reprobation in place of conditional reprobation\textsuperscript{24} most likely do so as an attempt to avoid an arbitrary and unconditional damnation. The objection posed is that if God unconditionally rejects some to damnation, than their damnation must also be unconditional; they are unjustly damned before ever being guilty of sin. Is this true? As Paul responds to this objection, “μὴ γένοιτο” (“Absolutely not!” HCSB, v.14).

\textsuperscript{23} If either reprobation or election is conditional, the other by necessity must also be conditional—conditioned on a lack of meeting the condition of the other. But if such conditions are not conditionally applied for all, then they are technically not conditions for anyone whatsoever. They would simply be unconditionally applied conditions, and therefore not conditions at all.

\textsuperscript{24} For example, Demarest, *Salvation*, 138.
Damnation is conditionally based on human sin. Reprobation is not what damns but what *appoints* damnation. Reprobation does not make men sinners any more than election makes the elect without sin. As John Bunyan says, “Reprobation respects God’s sovereignty; but to appoint to condemnation, his justice.”\(^ {25} \) Therefore, the foreordaining of damnation logically accounts for the future sinfulness of the non-elect.

**Excursus: God and the Ordaining of Sin**

But once again a new dilemma emerges: how can damnation be just if it is conditioned on sin which itself is ordained by God? Initially, some (i.e., Bunyan) appeal to God’s prescience—that “God most perfectly foreseeth the final impenitency of those that so die. . . .”\(^ {26} \) But such reasoning hits a theological wall as Calvin points out: “We, indeed, ascribe both prescience and predestination to God; but we say, that it is absurd to make the latter subordinate to the former.”\(^ {27} \) Others (i.e., Hodge)\(^ {28} \) explain God’s decreeing sin in terms of what they call God’s “permissive will.” However, although God certainly permits sin (for nothing occurs unless God permits it to pass), this term falsely masks the fact that God also ordains it.


\(^ {26} \) Ibid., 343.

\(^ {27} \) John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), III, xxi, 5. Later he says, “If God merely foresaw human events, and did not also arrange and dispose of them at his pleasure, there might be room for agitating the question, how far his foreknowledge amounts to necessity; but since he foresees the things which are to happen, simply because he has decreed that they are so to happen, it is vain to debate about prescience, while it is clear that all events take place by his sovereign appointment.” (III, xxiii, 6).

\(^ {28} \) *Romans*, 316.
Identifying the existence of both God’s decretive will (God’s will with respect to His decrees, also called His sovereign or secret will) and God’s revealed will (God’s will with respect to His desires as revealed in scripture, also called His preceptive will) helps shed light on this issue. As Feinberg says,

Since God’s decree covers everything that ever occurs, whatever someone does is within God’s will, i.e., the decretive will. Of course, not everything we do obeys God’s precepts. . . . So, an act may be in God’s will (part of his decree), but outside of his will (preceptive will) at the same time, because it is sin.  

Yet this still does not fully answer the initial question. And so what ultimately must be recognized is that “God’s decree is not an agent at all. Rather it is a blueprint for all that happens, but it doesn’t do anything itself.” As such, God has decreed sin, but man executes it and is therefore liable for it.

But in conclusion, exhaustive explanations and answers regarding questions about God’s sovereignty and human responsibility (such why God decrees sin despite it being contrary to His revealed will, how He condemns sinners for the very sin He ordained, and the reason why God elects some and rejects others) are simply mysteries to the human mind and can only be attributed to the “counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11, ESV). If ever asked such unanswerable questions, one does well to cite the words of Augustine, “You a man expect an answer from me: I also am a man. Wherefore, let us both listen to him [God]. . . .” (cf. Rom 9:20).

29. No One Like Him, 695.

30. Ibid., 530.

31. Quoted in Calvin, Institutes, III, xxiii, 5. See also Calvin’s advice: “Let us in the corruption of human nature contemplate the evident cause of condemnation (a cause which comes more closely home to us), rather than inquire into a cause hidden and almost incomprehensible in the predestination of God” (Institutes, III, xxiii, 8). “They
The Purpose of Reprobation

In verses 22-23 Paul refutes his rhetorical objection made in verse 19 by providing an explanation as to why God creates some vessels for dishonor. In other words, he provides an answer to a question of many Christians, including Anti-Calvinist, Roger Olson: “Why would he [God] do that [reprobate] if he is good, loving, and just?”

Paul gives his answer in the form of a rhetorical question that begs a positive response. At the center of his explanation is the adverbial participle ἑλὼν (“wishing”). While the majority of scholars understand ἑλὼν as functioning causally, and as such initially presenting Paul’s first two reasons, which are introduced by the two infinitives ἐνδείξασθαι (“to demonstrate”) and γνωρίσαι (“to make known”), some prefer to see ἑλὼν as function concessively (“although wishing”). However, ἑλὼν is in fact functioning causally. First, the infinitives flow much more naturally with a causal as opposed to a concessive function. In other words, God demonstrates His wrath and makes his power known by enduring the vessels of wrath, not inspite of enduring them. And secondly, this causal purpose parallels v.17 precisely.

will in vain torment themselves in seeking for a deeper cause than the secret and inscrutable counsel of God” (III, xxiv, 12). “Therefore, when it is asked why the Lord did so, we must answer, Because he pleased. But if you proceed farther to ask why he pleased, you ask for something greater and more sublime than the will of God, and nothing such can be found” (III, xxiii, 2).

32. Against Calvinism, 109.

Therefore, God’s purpose in reprobation (or more precisely, enduring the non-elect with patience, v. 22) is threefold: first, to demonstrate His wrath (v.22), secondly, to make his power known (v.22), and thirdly, and most significantly, to place a theological magnifying glass on His mercy lavished upon the elect (v.23). Reprobation is not arbitrary but for God’s glory.

**Excursus: “Esau I Hated”**

For many Christians, the three simple words “Esau I hated” (v.13) form one of the most puzzling statements in their Bible. Is this actually saying that God literally hated Esau? Many respond negatively by pointing out that Paul’s argument in verses 6-13 concerns election. Consequently, “Jacob I loved” means “Jacob I elected” while “Esau I

34. καὶ ἵνα (“and so that,” v.23) indicates that Paul is adding to His previous two purpose statements a third purpose. As Cranfield says, “that the last of these [three purpose clauses]” . . . “is dominant is clear. It alone is introduced by ἵνα; and it is given special emphasis by its position in the sentence, by the fact that it is extended by means of the two relative clauses which follow, and by the fact that verses 25-29 focus further attention on it. Above all, its content marks it off from the others; for the manifestation of the wealth of divine glory is nothing less than the ultimate purpose of God. The two other statements of purpose must therefore be explained in relation to it. . . .” (*Romans, 496*).

35. As Thabiti Anyabwile wisely says, “What would make such an action by God ‘defensible’ or even ‘worth it’? It must be that the ‘riches of His glory’ are so indescribably ‘worth it,’ and the expression of that glory not only defensible but the highest possible good, that God is right to act in this way. Seeing and savoring the glory of God must be so ineffably splendid and wonderful that God determines that even the horrible contrast between the eternal state of the wicked and the righteous would be a good and right way of making that glory known to the universe” (“Love the Truth,” The Gospel Coalition: Pure Church Blog, entry posted November 19, 2009, http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/thabitianyabwile/category/reprobation/ (accessed April 18, 2012). Martin Luther quotes Augustine as saying, “Some are permitted to remain in their most righteous condemnation, in order that they, (the elect), might understand that the whole human race had deserved and to what (punishment) the well deserved judgment of God would have to lead them, had not His unmerited mercy rescued them” (*Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954], 142).
hated” means “Esau I rejected.” Given that Paul’s argument in verses 6-13 concerns election, this interpretation is without a doubt what Paul is teaching as he quotes Malachi 1:2-3. This fact also helps distinguish between God’s action in election and His attitude towards the non-elect. In other words, if “hate” simply refers to God’s attitude towards individuals due to their sin, verse 13 would say, “I hated both Jacob and Esau,” for both are equally depraved. But the text shocks the reader with “Jacob I loved” indicating that behind “love” is the act of election and therefore behind “hate” is the reality of rejection.

But even so “hate” cannot be simply hyperbolic, and as such be reduced to “loved less” or “loved differently,” or anthropomorphic, for the context of Malachi 1:1-5 shows that God had genuine indignation and disfavor towards Edom. But at the same time, the anthropomorphism suggestion hints at a very significant fact about the nature of God’s hate. Due to drastic differences between God’s nature and character and man’s, one must realize that God’s hatred is a holy and righteous hate infinitely different from


37. This author admits that “hate” may be somewhat hyperbolic and that this explanation is not necessarily fraudulent due to what might be a similar idiomatic use of “hate” in Gen 29:33 cf. v.30; Lk 14:26; Mt 6:24; Jn 12:25. See Hodge, Romans, 312; Robert H. Mounce, “Romans,” The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, Vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 198-199; Shedd, Romans, 286.

38. Lenski, Romans, 605.

39. “Esau was not merely excluded from what Jacob enjoyed but was the object of a displeasure. . . .” (Murray, “Romans,” 22-23). Also Schreiner, “Romans,” 501. And even if one explains away “hated” in Rom 9:13 as “rejected,” he must still deal with the original statement in Mal 1:2-3 as well as several other texts that speak of God’s hatred towards people (i.e., Lev 20:23; 26:30; 32:19; Ps 5:5; 10:3; 11:5-6; 26:5; 53:5; 73:20; 78:59; 106:40; Prov 6:16, 19; 22:14; Is 61:8; Lam 2:6; Jer 12:8; Hos 9:15).
the hate that sinful humans experience and possess. Therefore, although humans may struggle to grasp and define the nature of this “holy hate,” they can yet affirm its reality.

But the reality of this hatred and the implication of Romans 9:13 (“Jacob I loved and Esau I didn’t”) begs the question, does God solely love the elect? Verse 13 does imply that God has a unique love for the elect—His bride, sheep, children, those whom He foreknew and foreloved—not known by the non-elect. However, limiting this unique salvific love to the elect does not negate God’s general love for all mankind as manifested by His gracious acts towards them (i.e., Mt 5:44-45; Lk 6:33) such as calling them to repentance (Ezek 33:11). As Bunyan well summarizes, Reprobation does not alienate the heart of God from the reprobate, nor tie him up from loving, favoring, or blessing of him; no, not from blessing of him with the gift of Christ, of faith, of hope, and many other benefits. It only denieth them that benefit, that will infallibly bring them to eternal life, and that in despite of all opposition; it only denieth so to bless them as the elect themselves are blessed.

40. A term used by Murray, which he says describes a hate that “belongs to the transcendent realm of God’s sovereignty for which there is no human analogy” (“Romans,” 23). “We must not predicate of this divine hate those unworthy features which belong to hate as it is excersized by us sinful men” (22).

41. As Murray says, “Esau could not be the object of the love borne to Jacob for, if so, all distinction would be obliterated, and what the text clearly indicates is the radical distinction” (“Romans,” 22). Also Schreiner, “Romans,” 500-501.

42. “Reprobation Asserted,” 338.
CHAPTER 3
HARDENING

A Preliminary Description

In verse 18 Paul presents the theological concept of hardening with the verb σκληρύνω (“hardens”). In Romans 2:5 Paul uses this word to refer to a spiritual insensitivity to respond positively in repentance to God’s forbearance. As BDAG defines it, σκληρύνω means “to cause to be unyielding in resisting information.” This description fits quite nicely with Paul’s use of a synonymous verb (πωρόω) in Romans 11:7. 43 Paul describes the hardness of non-elect Israelites by quoting Isaiah 29:10: “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day” (NASB). And finally, in Exodus 4-14 (the broader context Paul alludes to when citing Exodus 9:16 in v.17), the three Hebrew words used to describe the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart maintain this same line of thought. 44

Also extremely significant to note is the relationship between reprobation and hardening (at least the hardening Paul refers to here in Romans 9)—they are intrinsically


connected so that all who are reprobate will be hardened and all who are hardened will be damned.\textsuperscript{45} Paul assumes this fact. For example, he defends his statement about hardening (v.18) by discussing reprobation (v.19-23). In verse 18 Paul contrasts “hardens” with “mercy.” Since in Paul’s argument “mercy” refers to election to salvation, Paul’s use of “hardens” assumes reprobation to damnation. And lastly, the purpose of hardening (v.17) parallels exactly with the purpose of reprobation (v.21-23)—to further display God’s glory. Therefore, as Schreiner says, hardening is a spiritual condition that “denotes an inflexibility and insensibility to the gospel [or God’s word, as Moo says] that hinders people from being saved.”\textsuperscript{46}

**Responsive or Determinative?**

Having established a basic understanding of hardening, the next issue in forming a theological understanding of hardening is to consider whether God’s hardening of individuals, such as Pharaoh, is punitive, retributive, disciplinary, and/or responsive to sinners’ self-hardening, as many argue,\textsuperscript{47} or whether it is determinative, that is, ultimately

\textsuperscript{45} However, some would like to argue, by claiming that “wishing” in verse 22 is concessive ("although"), that God’s hardening is only temporary and is intended to lead sinners to repentance (for example, Lenski, *Romans*, 622-24, cf. 617). But, as argued previously, this participle functions causally. This interpretation ignores the fact that the hardening Paul speaks of is intrinsically attached to reprobation, which has damnation as its terminal. Somewhat parallel (but with significant differences) to how God works out the salvation of the elect through effectual calling, conversion, and sanctification, God brings about the damnation of the reprobate through hardening. As Calvin says, “But as the Lord seals his elect by calling and justification, so by excluding the reprobate either from the knowledge of his name or the sanctification of his Spirit, he by these marks in a manner discloses the judgment which awaits them” (*Institutes*, III, xxi, 7).

\textsuperscript{46} “Romans,” 511; Moo, “Romans,” 596-97.

\textsuperscript{47} For example, Lenski, *Romans*, 616; Mounce, “Romans,” 200; Morris, “Romans,” 361.
based in God’s sovereign decision. Both the passage Paul alludes to in verse 17, Exodus 4-14, and the text of Romans 9 reveal the answer.

In Exodus 4-14, which tells of the ten plagues and the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt, various references are made to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Some texts say that Pharaoh hardens himself (8:15; 8:32; 9:34), others say that God hardens Pharaoh (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8), and sometimes the text states that Pharaoh is hardened without any identification of the one doing the hardening (7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35). But notably, prior to the first reference to God’s hardening Pharaoh (9:12), Pharaoh is said to harden himself (8:15). Some see this as evidence for a responsive view of hardening. But what is often ignored, and is yet extremely significant to this discussion, is that before Pharaoh is ever said to harden his own heart (8:15), God states that He knows Pharaoh will respond negatively to Moses’ petition (3:18-20) and blatantly predicts that He (God) will harden Pharaoh’s heart (4:21; 7:3). Then without surprise, a handful of verses later the text states that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened just “as the LORD had said” (7:13; ESV; emphasis mine). This phrase, “as the LORD had said,” is then repeated in several proceeding occurrences of Pharaoh’s heart being hardened (7:22; 8:19; 9:12, 35), most notably the first reference to Pharaoh hardening himself (8:15). In other words, “the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was understood by the narrator to be God’s work from the very beginning.”

But to cast all doubt aside, after the eighth plague in 10:16-20, even after Pharaoh changes his stubborn mind, God hardens Pharaoh’s heart so that Pharaoh would not let

the Israelites go just yet. How could this hardening be responsive if Pharaoh’s response is relatively positive (see also 13:17-14:31)? On the contrary, as Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (ESV).

Not once in Ex 4-14 is the assertion of God’s hardening of Pharaoh grounded in any attitude or act of Pharaoh. Instead, again and again the reason given for the hardening is God’s purpose to demonstrate his power and magnify his name.49

And this sovereign purpose (Ex 3:19-22; 10:1; 14:4, 17-18), in which a responsive hardening is completely out of view, is exactly what Paul speaks of in Romans 9 (specifically v.17, 22), where even more support is found for determinative hardening.

In Romans 9, where God’s sovereignty pervades every nook and cranny of Paul’s argument, seeing anything but determinative hardening is difficult to do if one handles the text honestly. For example, in verse 18 Paul stresses God’s sovereign choice in stating that God hardens those “whom He wills.”50 And further, as indicated by the parallel in verse 18 between “mercy” and “hardens,” just as God’s bestowal of mercy depends not on human will or effort but on His sovereign freedom (v.16), so likewise hardening is dependent on God’s determination. This is precisely Paul’s point in verse 18. And if the raising up of Pharaoh to power is by divine appointment (v.17), then the hardening of Pharaoh one verse later (v.18) should not be stripped of God’s sovereignty so as to make Paul speak some sort of theological double standard. Finally, if Paul has responsive hardening in view, what is to be made of the objection in verse 19? To present such a


50. Paul is pointing out God’s sovereignty in hardening. He states, “whom He wills” not “all who have first rejected His truth” (Pink, *Sovereignty*, 111-112).
rhetorical objection if in fact God’s will in hardening is *not* determinative, but responsive, would be to speak nothing more than balderdash.\(^{51}\)

So in summary, although those who are hardened are sinners and therefore do not receive hardening unjustly, and although being a sin which the non-elect actively commit and for which they are held responsible (see Ex 9:34), hardening is ultimately grounded in the determinative purpose of God.

**Excursus: God’s Role in Hardening**

The reality of God’s determinative hardening when coupled with a verse such as James 1:13, which denies that God tempts anyone begs a discussion on God’s role in hardening. The best way to resolve this tension is by distinguishing between God’s immediate and mediate agencies.\(^ {52}\) For God to act with immediate agency is for God to act directly and without any intermediary agents (i.e., His creating *ex nihilo*). But for God to work medially would be to act through the mediation of His creation (i.e., nature, humans, animals, and/or angels), although He still remains the ultimate cause of such acts. And as Hodge points out, scripture is full of references to God’s mediate agency—God is said to have done something when He is actually not the immediate agent performing the action.\(^ {53}\) A prime example of this occurs in the first chapter of Job in which Satan (v.6-12) works through the Sabeans (v.14-15), a lightning storm (v.16), the

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51. As Moo states, “if Paul had in fact wanted his readers to assume that God’s hardening was based on a person’s self-hardening, we would have expected him to make this clear in response to the objection in v.19” (“Romans,” 598).

52. See Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 651-56.

Chaldeans (v.17), and an extremely strong wind (v.18) to devastate much of Job’s possessions and kill many of his servants and children. Yet in verse 21 Job identifies God as the one who had taken away. As verse 22 says, “Job did not . . . blame God” (HCSB).

So in relation to hardening, God mysteriously and determinatively hardens reprobates through their own immediacy and depravity. When God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, Pharaoh’s will is not violated. Never once does he object, but instead, he does exactly what he wishes—sin. As R.C. Sproul says, “All that God has to do to harden people’s hearts is to remove restraints. He gives them a longer leash. . . . In a sense he gives them enough rope to hang themselves.” Consequently, no moral imperfection is imposed on God.

SUMMARY

So to summarize what has been presented, in Romans 9:1-23 Paul teaches the doctrine of God’s unconditional election of individuals (contra. corporate) to salvation (contra. to temporal task). Paul does so in response to the dilemma of Israel’s unbelief and the resulting question, has God’s word failed Israel? His answer is “no,” because God’s elective purpose at this point in time is to save only a remnant of Israelites. But this teaching logically prompts Paul to address the doctrines of hardening and reprobation. As presented, reprobation refers to God’s passive and unconditional decreeing or predestinating the non-elect to damnation (damnation being conditioned on their sin) all for His own glory. And lastly, Paul and Exodus 4-14 teach that hardening, which is ultimately based on God’s sovereign determination, refers to a spiritual state intrinsically attached to reprobation that renders one spiritually obdurate and incapable of responding positively to God’s word.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Rom 11:32-33, ESV).
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